

For Immediate Release

Lezley Saar

Color Me Baddd

17 January – 14 March 2026

Opening Reception: Saturday, January 17th, 5:00 – 7:00pm

Walter Maciel Gallery is pleased to present *Color Me Baddd* by Los Angeles based artist, Lezley Saar, marking her fourth solo show with our gallery. The exhibition includes works from two series: *Color Me Baddd* and *Rap Thugs-n-Dimes*.

Color Me Baddd includes a series of small and large-format portraits that explore the intertwined concepts of colorism, privilege and representation. Drawing from the experience of being mixed-raced while occupying a white-presenting space, Saar examines how phenotype, skin color, hair texture and facial features shape social hierarchies and self-perception. The portraits do not depict specific individuals but instead function as symbolic figures through which broader cultural forces are explored. Imagery referencing birth, nature, DNA, duality, binaries, culture and history forms a visual language that situates colorism as both inherited and constructed.

The paintings are rendered on different fabrics in a colonial style associated with 18th and 19th-century portraiture using acrylic paint and other collaged elements. Presented as both large tapestries on curtain rods and smaller intimate works stretched over wood panels, the works deliberately invoke the historical roots of racial classification while reflecting the artist's own bi-racial background. Many of the titles are named after 1990s R&B songs triggering an emotional and cultural resonance that contrasts with the formality of the genre. Saar adopts a surrealist and symbolist approach to question issues of ambiguity, acceptance and equality within the expectations of cultural bias and racial identity.

In conjunction, an earlier series entitled *Rap Thugs-n-Dimes* depicts mixed media paintings of rap artists with tribal African motifs, linking contemporary rappers to Africa's legacy of Griots—oral storytellers who preserved cultural memory in the absence of written language. Saar's engagement with rap culture is informed by her early experience as a deejay with the Souls of Black Folk Collective in the 1970s. The rappers depicted include Gangsta Boo, Juvenile and Lil' Kim who are primarily associated with Gangsta Rap and gained notoriety in the 1990s. These portraits are presented as individual characters rather than representatives of a genre or community with rich and symbolically layered materials like album covers, money, gold lamé and traditional African fabrics collaged on to the unconventional pictorial surfaces. Other objects such as wigs, boxing gloves, skulls, jewelry, dolls, and graffiti motifs function as cultural signifiers for identity, struggle, status and mortality. Reinforcing a dialogue between historical and contemporary modes of storytelling, the rap stars are celebrated as cultural icons during their moment of empowerment. Together, *Color Me Baddd* and *Rap Thugs-n-Dimes* position painting as a site where history, music, race and personal narrative intersect, inviting viewers to reconsider how visual culture shapes and reflects lived experience.

Saar studied at L'Institut Francais de Photographie in Paris and San Francisco State University before receiving a BFA from California State University, Northridge. Her work was recently included in the exhibition, *With the Moon Under Our Feet* at The Philosophical Research Society in Los Angeles. In 2022, Saar had a solo exhibition entitled *Diorama Drama* at Craft Contemporary in Los Angeles. Prior to that show in 2017, her survey exhibition, *Salon des Refusés* was on view at the California African American Museum in Los Angeles. Her work was included in *Black American Portraits* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *Legends from Los Angeles; Betye, Alison and Lezley Saar* at the Crocker Art Museum, *Transamerica/n: Gender, Identity, Appearance Today* at the McNay Art Museum, *Personal Truth* at El Camino College Art Gallery in Torrance, CA, Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, NY and *Get Up, Stand Up Now* at Sommerset House in London. Saar's work is in the collections of several museums including Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles; Studio Museum in Harlem; Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento; Museum of Fine Arts in Houston; Santa Barbara Museum of Art; Hessel Museum of Art at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY; Hood Museum at Dartmouth College in Hanover, NH; Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, NY; Smith College Museum of Art in Southampton, MA; Museum of Art and History in Lancaster, CA; Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art in Eugene, OR and the Petrucci Family Foundation Collection in Asbury Park, NJ. Last year, Saar received the 2025 Fellows of Contemporary Art (FOCA) Fellowship and was the recipient of a J. Paul Getty Mid-Career Grant in 1996.